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THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON THE PREACHING TASK OF THE MODERN MINISTER

Conducted by

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Part II. The Religion of Jesus

Required reading: Bousset, *Jesus*; Case, *The Historicity of Jesus*; Anderson, *The Man of Nazareth*; Montefiore, *The Religious Teaching of Jesus*; Moffatt, *The Theology of the Gospels*.

To say that Jesus is the inspiration of the modern preacher is simply to state a fact to which any examination of modern sermonic literature will abundantly testify. The preacher feels himself to be first of all a disciple of Jesus. His most acceptable title is "minister of Jesus Christ." He rejoices to speak of Jesus as the Master. He has a consciousness, which is the chief credential of his ministry, of a religious experience in which Jesus is central. That centrality of Jesus may not always be easy of definition, but it is the most certain fact of his inner life. As he thinks of God, he sets over against the ultimate cosmic reality of his philosophy the heavenly Father to whom Jesus prayed. He tries, of course, to make a synthesis of these in his own thinking, but for himself, he prays to the Father, and to the people he preaches the Father-God.

As the modern preacher looks at the ongoing social process, passionately desiring to aid in the achievement of the better humanity and the better society in which he believes, he feels that Jesus is ever before him. He is sure that men need the spirit of Jesus and the appreciation of his sense of values. A careful interpreter has doubtless at this point some difficulties in detail, some problems that go to the heart of his study of the Gospels, but he is sure that Jesus' way and Jesus' attitude have in them the promise of the finer social adjustments.

Jesus inspires us to our tasks because of the unity of religion and morality in his experience. The modern minister does not think of religion as a special interest of human life, or a phase of human endeavor. He thinks of religion as a certain quality of all human interests. He thinks of the social process as itself religious, for in God human society lives and moves and has its being. The society which is being progressively achieved includes God and man. Thus the social and religious motives are fused. Religion has taken up ethics and all social motive into itself. To speak of the ethical implications of religion is a kind of tautology. The love of God and the love of men are not alternatives. We find God in ourselves, in our aspiring spirits, in our fellow-men, in the very movement and urge of things. When we find God in an immediacy of spiritual experience, he is the

God who talks to us of righteousness, of human justice and love, of a Kingdom of Truth to be established among men. It is pre-eminently in Jesus that these religious and ethical values are one. It is in his experience that the love of God and of men are interrelated. Doubtless the God-experience is central, but it is ever united with the social experience. The modern preacher finds himself inspired by Jesus just because he must preach the social meaning of spirituality and the spiritual meaning of social efforts. Evangelism and social service are different aspects of one endeavor.

The preacher finds Jesus constantly talking of the Kingdom of God. It may be an eschatological conception of a society to be effected by the irruption of God into the process of history, or it may be a society which Jesus himself was establishing, in which he himself was living, and to which he was summoning others. In any case, it is an ideal of a reign of righteousness; it is the regnancy of Holy Will; it is the end of bitterness, strife, and selfishness; it is the eternal dominion of love. What is this but the goal of that social process in which we are and in which the preacher must urge men to play their part in order that they may carry it onward to its better day? Jesus' splendid faith that the future is bright with a hope of righteousness finds echo in the heart of the modern preacher.

But the ongoing social process is no easy and inevitable evolution. Our study of history and observation of current events teach us that every achievement costs struggle and pain. We see the way of human service as a *via dolorosa*. That a Messiah should be crucified is no longer foolishness, but illumination; no longer a stumbling-block, but a tragic truth. So the cross of Jesus becomes an inspiration to heroic sacrifice. It is to the preacher an explanation of the constant failure of righteous effort because of human weakness and folly; it is the solemn declaration of the price that must be paid for the salvation of men; and it is the promise of victory, for the symbol of shame becomes the symbol of service.

It is simple fact that the modern preacher is never more at home than when he is preaching from the Gospels. He illustrates divine love from the parable of the Prodigal and from Jesus' forgiveness of the wayward woman; he explains human obligation from the parables of the Good Samaritan and of the Ungenerous Servant; he uses the sublime scene in Gethsemane to help his people to meet their sorrows in resignation to the divine will. Even the paradoxes of the Beatitudes and the hard demands of unselfishness and non-resistance help him to preach on supreme spiritual values and the superior significance of duties over rights. There can be no doubt that the pulpit finds in Jesus an inexhaustible subject for its messages to human life.

Yet there are great difficulties in preaching upon Jesus today. When one seriously considers how to present the life and teachings of Jesus to a modern congregation so that they will be of appealing power he finds himself confronted with a most perplexing problem. The nature of the problem may be recognized if one imagines one's self preaching to a group of intelligent Chinese who have no Christian presuppositions, and who want to understand why the preacher is speaking to them of a man of so long ago who lived in Galilee and was crucified by his countrymen. It is only less easily seen if one thinks of a congregation of college students who have indeed certain childhood presuppositions about the

gospel story and the church theology, but who have made no connection between these inherited ideas and the world of today.

That many preachers do not satisfactorily meet these difficulties may be seen by a consideration of three types of preaching about Jesus which are very common. First, there is the presentation of the theological Christ. The old systematic theology using the entire biblical material uncritically, worked out a divine plan extending from Adam to Jesus, involving prophecy and fulfilment, and a consummation in a salvation wrought out and completed in the death and resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The business of the preacher was then to convince his hearers of their need of salvation, to present them the fact of salvation, and to show them how they might secure its benefits. The life and teachings of Jesus became then inevitably subordinate to the great redemptive transaction which Jesus came to complete. Of course, this view has very little support in the Gospels. It involves a conception of God and of human history and of the growth of Christian theology utterly out of keeping with the necessities of modern thinking. And most serious of all, the theological Christ does not satisfy any vital human need of modern men. We do not need a salvation effected for us centuries ago: we need a salvation to be effected in us in our present age.

As a reaction against this theologizing process there is, in the second place, a tendency to preach the historical Jesus. Let us find out just what he was, what he did, what he thought, what he said, and let us tell the people the facts. This involves, of course, a detailed study of the conditions of Palestine, the currents of thought among the Jews, the matters of Pharisaic legalism, of national and apocalyptic messianism, and particularly the question of Jesus' own attitude toward the various aspects of the Jewish institutions and ambitions. It involves the problem of the miraculous in its historical aspects. This is all very important and interesting, and to a certain extent necessary for any study of Jesus. But after all, people cannot be forever concerned with history. The whole messianic conception is so hopelessly unfruitful for our modern world that the preacher is under constant embarrassment in the use of it. An able and scholarly preacher recently stated that he believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and found his gospel in that great faith. But we immediately want to ask what he meant by the term. Does any human need today demand a Messiah for its satisfaction? Is there any place in the social process as it is now going on for a Messiah? The preacher is a student, and therefore vitally interested in history. Most practical people have only a subordinate interest in history, and a very subordinate interest when the question at issue is one of present-day duty.

As an escape from the difficulties of messianism, and as a response to the practical needs of life, many preachers turn to the ethical example of Jesus. Never mind about Jewish speculations, and never mind about Christian theologizings. If Jesus lived the perfect life, that is what we need to know today. So we have sermons on the Manhood of Jesus, the Courage of Jesus, the Tenderness of Jesus, and so forth. In order that this may be as practical as possible, the endeavor is often made to bring Jesus over into modern conditions, that we may see his ethical perfection in the midst of our own puzzling life. A popular book some years ago bore the title, *What Would Jesus Do?* If Jesus were a stockholder in a modern corporation, if he were involved in some questionable business transaction, if he were a labor leader in time of strike, if he were an employee directed to

perform some dishonest act—in any of these situations, or as a boy at school, or a minister of a fashionable church, or in any other modern place, what would he do? Of course, Jesus could not be in any of these and still be Jesus. So the question really resolves itself into a consideration of what an ideally perfect human being would do. The question may have some ethical value, but it is more or less artificial. However stimulating for the moment it might be—and as the book mentioned undoubtedly was—no such criterion of conduct could be of permanent value. The exhortation to follow the example of perfection as seen in Jesus is at the best somewhat dull and lifeless moralizing. We constantly feel the artificiality of the demand to imitate the faultless model.

As against the unreality of the theological Christ and the anachronism of the Jewish Messiah, and the coldness of the exemplary Jesus, what can the modern preacher find in Jesus to help him in his task? How can he escape the difficulties which seem to be inherent in the great subject? He can find that which was fundamental in Jesus' own consciousness, and which he himself offered as his supreme contribution to his fellow-men, namely, the religion of Jesus. That religion was fellowship with God, reverence, confidence, love, an experience of prayer and sense of sonship; it was comradeship with men and women and children, sympathy with their needs and their failings, longing for their help, and gracious, sacrificial service; it was an appreciation of human values, social values, spiritual values, as over against sensual, material, transitory values; it was a continuous experience of vital, joyous, healthy religion as a life to be lived in that day and in his circumstances. The preacher feels the glory of the achievement. He declares it to his people, not so much as a model to be kept, but as an inspiration to be experienced. The teachings of Jesus, then, are not statutes to be obeyed, they are challenges to moral earnestness. We see what Jesus thought and said about certain conditions of his day, and that helps us to think and speak upon other conditions of our day. After all, we do not so much need directions upon our duty, but purity of heart, sincerity of motive, clarity of thought to enable us to find out our duty, and then we need the impulse to perform it. In the presence of Jesus, men do actually find out their duty, and do feel impelled to perform it; and they feel its high religious meaning as the will of God.

The appreciation of the religion of Jesus brings the preacher back to the three types of preaching which we have criticized, and enables him to transform them. Of course, he will present Jesus as the revelation of God, as the incarnation of the divine. But it will not be an irruption of an absent God into the human process. God is always immanent; he is ever in our human best. He is in Jesus so supremely just because he was in Jesus so supremely. We cannot find God in philosophies; he is not at the end of a syllogism. We must find him in the actual life of our progressing humanity. Where does the divine personality speak to us in personal terms, in personal values, as in Jesus of Nazareth? We pray to the God who we believe is like Jesus. That does not give us the theological Christ, the static revelation; it gives us the Son of God saying ever to us, "My Father and your Father, my God and your God."

The second type of preaching, that of the historical Jesus, the Messiah of the Jews, is likewise transformed by the appreciation of the central significance of the personal religion of Jesus. Whether he regarded himself as the Messiah and how he so regarded himself, whether his ethics were "end-of-the-age" ethics, whether

he looked for catastrophe or development—all these are very interesting questions. The modern preacher should study them very carefully. The opinion which he forms upon these points will modify his preaching. But after all, he is concerned with the religious values of Jesus' experience. A Jesus who looked for a long development of the principles of the gospel would be more to our modern thinking than one who expected victory through cataclysm. Yet the religious attitude of the one might be none the less inspirational than that of the other.

The third type of preaching, that of Jesus the exemplar, is extraordinarily vitalized when we cease to think of Jesus as a model set up once and for all as a standard for humanity, and regard him as living the large and full religious life which his age demanded, and thus challenging us to a like endeavor. There is a certain great sense in which Jesus has given us the way of life once and for all. His fellowship with God must be the religious experience with its marvelous motive power that earnest souls will always seek. His great words are eternal truth that can never be outgrown. The nobler sons of men will always come, not to be ministered unto, but to minister. We shall ever express our religious faith and aspiration as we call ourselves disciples of Jesus.

The books indicated to be read in connection with this study deal with the significance of Jesus from several points of view. The writer has included his own book, *Social Institutions and Ideals of the Bible*, in the following study on "The Religion of the Bible." He may refer, however, at this point to Part III, "The Social Teachings of Jesus," and particularly to chap. xxx, "The Teachings of Jesus as a Product of his Experience," and to chap. xxxvii, "The Social Teachings of Jesus and the Prophets in the Modern World."

We take first of all *The Historicity of Jesus*, by Case, for it meets a question which has been thrust to the fore of recent years, namely, whether Jesus of Nazareth really lived. Was he not the creation of pious idealism? Was he not an imaginary Messiah fashioned out of Old Testament hopes? May he not be of mythological origin? May there have been a real Jesus whose personality is entirely lost in legendary accretions? These questions Case answers on the basis of an examination of the negative arguments, a critical study of the Gospel documents, an estimate of extra-biblical testimony, and a discussion of the evidence for the reality of Jesus afforded in the early Christian community. His estimate of the significance of Jesus while brief is exceedingly significant. He lays emphasis upon the personal impression which Jesus made upon men. He argues that Jesus used the messianic conception, but did not allow it to master him. Finally he points out that the church in looking upon Jesus as representing ideal humanity and absolute deity had a fundamental justification, for in him is the demonstration of spiritual power that we need today and in his spiritual likeness we must think of the unseen God.

Anderson and Moffatt represent the more conservative critical views of modern scholarship. They are both definitely opposed to the eschatological school of interpretation which would regard Jesus as expecting the speedy catastrophic end of the age and his own reign as Messiah. Anderson's *The Man of Nazareth* is more popular, and indeed even somewhat homiletic in character. The latter quality will not make it of less service to the preacher. It is a presentation of Jesus as the perfect man, "a new type of man." He regards him as having grown into an understanding of his messiahship, which, however, he entirely

reinterpreted in terms of salvation for men. The Kingdom which Jesus was inaugurating was to be on the earth, in the present system of things, but to be a nobler organization of human society. He expected success at first, but subsequently realized that he must die. His death was to be a covenant sacrifice, significant in some way for the forgiveness of sins. The author at this point rather vaguely accepts the view that Jesus was in some way separated from God by the sins which he had assumed. This endeavor to conserve the dogma of the old theology is not very successful. He regards Jesus as having definitely founded the church at the Last Supper. The book exalts the perfections of Jesus, but in rather a modern idealization. The Jesus of the Gospels would seem to achieve his victory through struggle and faith, rather than through immediate endowment.

Moffatt, in *The Theology of the Gospels*, is concerned, of course, with the interpretation of the evangelists, and yet the book is practically an estimate of Jesus. He holds that Jesus felt himself to be founding the Kingdom, which is present now, but which is eventually to become miraculously established. The prayers of Jesus show that he held no such predestinarian view as the eschatologists suppose. The filial, and not the messianic, consciousness is basal. Jesus did not teach that God was the father of men, but that God was his father. He thus mediated sonship to men. Learning the way of Jesus, we too become sons of God. This is a very vital conception. It has wonderful preaching possibilities. It is indeed the religion of Jesus, a glorious gospel, fit to be proclaimed.

We have chosen Bousset and Montefiore to represent the eschatological and more critical school. However little any preacher might agree with them he will find himself shaken out of his conventional attitude toward the Gospels by reading these books. After all, he is not called upon to be an apologist for Jesus. His business is not to prove him faultless and divine. He ought to have faith enough in Jesus to let him be himself. Perhaps greatness of character and divinity of personality do not consist so much in a static perfection as in a splendid endeavor to achieve what the soul feels to be best. Bousset's *Jesus* presents a marvelously effective personality. He realizes the awful God of judgment, who is about to appear among men and to assign them to their destiny in heaven or in hell. But he believes that God is infinitely willing to forgive, is seeking to save his people, and has commissioned Jesus as the Messiah to lead them to salvation. With marvelous personal powers he heals disease, and with persuasive utterance he preaches to the crowds. He has little interest in the world and in human society, family, state, or nation. These are all to pass away. Only one thing is vital—personal righteousness. Of course, righteousness is social. Jesus finds love to God only in love to man. But he has no social teachings properly so called. That is to say, he is not concerned with the improvement of the social organism. He is passionately anxious for men to live with one another in such sacrificial rightness that they may be ready for the Kingdom which is coming. Everything is to be sacrificed for that. It is the glorious hope of spiritual liberation in which all the lesser hopes of men are gathered up. Bousset points out how, separated from Jesus' time and thought as we are in our modern world, we are ever yet his disciples as he leads to God, to repentance, to faith, and to eternal hope.

Montefiore offers us a generous and sympathetic interpretation of Jesus from the Jewish standpoint. He takes a severely critical view of the Gospel tradition, accepting as historical a minimum of the words and deeds attributed to

Jesus. He controverts the Gospel estimate of the Pharisees, of the law, and of the popular attitude toward these. He thinks that so far as Jesus is fairly represented by this view, he was carried away by his prophetic emphasis upon vital, spiritual, ethical obligations, as over against those that are trivial and ceremonial. For Jesus is a prophet; he is inspired. His authority, which was different from that of the scribes, was the same authority as they possessed who cried, "Thus saith the Lord." He regarded himself as more than a prophet, as the Messiah of whom the prophets had spoken. But this was natural and fitting. Sharing the view of his time that the end of the age was imminent, and feeling himself to be the spiritual leader to protest against the evils that were to be judged and to lead the people to repentance, he came to feel that he must be the Promised One. His teaching carried forward the best teaching of the prophets and the best teaching of the rabbis. In some respects it surpassed them all. In its harsher aspects of judgment, however, it did not reach to that universalism which is now the passionate faith of the modern Jew.

Questions for Discussion

1. What did Jesus mean by "The Kingdom of God"? How may this idea be used in the pulpit?
2. Were his teachings offered as statutes, as mandates for present society, or were they given to those who first made choice of the Kingdom of God?
3. If the latter alternative is true, how would it be possible to use Jesus' teaching on such a problem as divorce?
4. Consider how one may present the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount as the product of Jesus' own experience in Nazareth.
5. Phillips Brooks said that the whole Gospel was in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. What would this mean for our pulpit message?
6. Consider how the preacher may use the miracle narratives as representing the impression which Jesus made upon his followers.
7. What is the experiential value to the modern Christian of the statement, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father"? Is it more effective if used morally or metaphysically? What practical use would the preacher make of it?
8. Which can we understand more easily today, God or Jesus? Which then should be expressed in terms of the other?
9. The question is sometimes raised whether there ever will be a more perfect human character and a more perfect moral teacher than Jesus. Is the question reasonable? Are we concerned with moral absolutes?
10. What modern preachers of your acquaintance speak most effectively on Jesus? Endeavor to analyze their power.

Books for Further Reading

Sanday, <i>The Life of Christ in Recent Research</i>	Harnack and Herrmann, <i>The Social Gospel</i>
Clarke, <i>The Ideal of Jesus</i>	Mathews, <i>The Gospel and the Modern Man</i>
Hyde, <i>Jesus' Way</i>	Denney, <i>Jesus and the Gospel</i>
Hill, <i>Shall We Do Without Jesus?</i>	